

**Engler, Mark and Paul, This is an Uprising: How
Nonviolent Revolt is Shaping the Twenty-First Century**

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A lot has been written about strategic nonviolent action since Gene Sharp published his seminal book on “The politics of Nonviolent Action” in 1972. Paul and Mark Engler’s book more or less sums it up. However, the oeuvre is more than an introduction into the world of strategic non-violence. It is a primer into the ideas of peaceful mobilization for social change and an exploration of the American history of popular protest and uprising. In short: it is a book for people trying to understand social change, and those trying to create it.

Mark and Paul Engler are no unknowns. Mark is an editorial board member of “Dissent”, one of America’s leading intellectual journals on political ideas, and the author of “How to rule the world”, a book on the crisis of neo-liberalism, neo-conservatism, and the hope that both will be overcome by a more “democratic globalization”. Paul is the founding Director of the Center for the Working Poor and has more than ten years of experiences in the global justice and labor movement. Both together publish short articles on democracyuprising.com, which focuses on specific aspects or episodes of the book.

“This in an uprising” takes Gene Sharp and his personal journey from pacifism towards Strategic Nonviolent Action as a starting point and skillfully mixes Sharp’s personal episodes and anecdotes with the development of his ideas. This biographical approach to explain the development of thoughts and theories is used throughout the whole book, making it easy to read and providing the reader with interesting information on key figures of social movements in America on the fly.

The authors also refer to Martin Luther King’s civil rights movements and Gandhi’s defiance campaign as “classic” historical examples of nonviolent action. However, their strong focus on Sharp and his con-

ceptualization of power and understanding of nonviolence as strategic, rather than principled, action also represents a shortcoming of the book as it leaves other concepts widely unattended.

In the second chapter, Engler and Engler address a basic problem everyone engaged in social change must face: whether to follow a movement-based or structure-oriented approach. The ideas of the first tradition are exemplified by Fox Piven and Richard Cloward's theories on social movements and are contrasted with Saul D. Alinsky's approach of structure-oriented community organizing. The authors eventually conclude that the marriage between both approaches represents a major breakthrough.

As an example for such a hybrid between a momentum-driven movement and structure-based organization, the authors present the example of Otpor's resistance against Milosevic in Serbia. Protests against Milosevic started in 1996, but reached a dead end in late 1997 and left many activists feeling discouraged and depressed. Many faded out of the activities as a result. In order to overcome the problem of volatility of the protests, Otpor was founded and introduced some aspects of community organizing. To form a sustainable movement, the activists decided to rely on small groups (mostly built up by friends) to provide these activists with special training, to build local capacity for action, and to unite these groups loosely under the banner of Otpor and the common goal to bring down Milosevic. This hybrid strategy slowed Otpor's achievement of its goals, but sustained the movement over the next three years. In the end, however, the movement was not able to survive after the ultimate goal was reached. Otpor proved itself incapable of influencing post-transition politics as a party, and did not spawn watchdog organizations outside the parliament.

After providing this example of nonviolent action that had rather mixed results, Engler and Engler address in the following chapters critical points for the success of a movement. First, drawing on Sharp's theory of power, they emphasize the importance of the movement's capacity to direct its power against the "pillars of support" of the given regime and to split the forces of the opponent. Further, pointing at the example of the "Occupy Wall Street" movement, they highlight the importance of disruption as a critical element of successful nonviolent action. While

conventional protests like the “One Nation Working together” protest march on Washington drew more than 175 000 protestors in October 2010, it did not create the same momentum as “Occupy”, which disrupted everyday life to a greater extent. In the same sense, Engler and Engler discuss the “ACT UP” movement which polarized the country by criticizing the government’s reaction to the spread of AIDS during the late 1980s. As a so-called “divider” movement it proved to be successful since it mobilized former neutral bystanders by polarizing the political landscape. Finally, the authors focus on the aspect of discipline and consequent nonviolent strategies by referring to the history of “Earth first”, a militant group which became famous for tree spiking. When this strategy backfired, “Earth First!” adopted a strategy of consequent non-violence and upheld this strategy even after key activists were attacked. This resilience eventually triggered mass mobilization and guaranteed the group’s success.

The authors provide a rich variety of both historical and contemporary examples of nonviolent resistance and campaigns throughout the book. However, the piece focuses very much on the history of American social movements with only a few excursions to other central movements in the history of nonviolent resistance, like Ghandi’s Salt March and defiance campaign or Otpor’s struggle to overthrow Milosevic.

In the end, Mark and Paul Engler’s contribution is an attempt to overcome the dilemma of effective mass mobilization and sustainable change by combining the existing theoretical approaches on nonviolent action. According to the authors, “mass mobilization alter[s] the term of political debate and create[s] new possibilities for progress; structure-based organizing helps take advantage of this potential and protects against efforts to roll back advances; and countercultural communities preserve progressive values, nurturing dissidents who go to initiate the next waves of revolt” (Engler and Engler 2016, p. 253). In other words, they propose a division of labor to transition successful social mobilization into sustainable social change.

However, while this book and its approach of combining different strategies is innovative, it has shortcomings as well. The book is generally biased towards the positive role civil society plays in the formation of movements and grassroots community organizations. This might be

rooted in the fact that the authors have been engaged in the business of organizing and protest for decades. However, civil society does not necessarily advance in a progressive direction. If we think of the civil rights campaign in the US, we also have to consider the Ku Klux Klan and several other extremist “uncivil” movements. This relevant debate on the “uncivil civil society”, however, remains unmentioned.

Furthermore, the authors themselves admit that several questions remain open, namely structural problems and potential conflicts of interest between activists following the different approaches of momentum-driven campaigns, and structure-oriented organizing as well as the coordination problem. How, for example, should the proposed division of labor between momentum-driven campaigns like “Occupy” and structure-oriented organizations like classical unions be organized? Should they be organized by a common committee in advance or is it the spontaneous outcome of the protest itself? What if there is no organization taking up the effort to secure the achievements of a social movement? How is going to do the job? It would have advanced the field of resistance studies if the authors had considered such questions.

Nonetheless, the book is one of my 2016-favourites on the topic. It has great value as an introduction and an informed overview, which predestines it as course book on social movements and nonviolent action.

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